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THE TRINITY: GOD'S LOVE OVERFLOWING 1

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Introduction 3

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“The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing” is the product of many years’ effort. Our work 5
group was called into being by the 212th General Assembly (2000), who instructed the 6
Office of Theology and Worship to constitute a group to study the doctrine of the Trinity

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in Presbyterian theology, worship, and life. A report was due in 2003, but work was 8
delayed by the events of September 11, 2001. In 2004, the 216th General Assembly 9
affirmed our request to seek a response from the larger church in preparing a final draft.

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This we have done, and the response has been heartening. We found many faithful 11
Presbyterians eager to enter into deep theological reflection and discussion with us. 12

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The paper does not present an exhaustive or new doctrine of the Trinity. It aims to assist 14

the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in reclaiming the doctrine of the Trinity in theology, 15
worship, and life. Often the church takes up a theological issue only when there is great

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controversy—a time when a lack of consensus on an issue embroils the church in an 17
intractable debate. The doctrine of the Trinity is a pressing issue for contemporary 18
Presbyterians for precisely the opposite reason. Despite the remarkable renewal of 19
Trinitarian theology in recent decades, this doctrine is widely neglected or poorly 20
understood in many of our congregations. The members of our work group are 21
convinced that the doctrine of the Trinity is crucial to our faith, worship and service; it is

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our earnest prayer that Presbyterians will once again find in this doctrine good and joyful 23

news! 24

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“God’s Love Overflowing” is a metaphor, deeply rooted in scripture and Christian 26
tradition that speaks of the infinite ways the triune God loves all of creation, including us.

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Comparing God’s love to a waterfall or a stream may seem impersonal. Yet biblical 28
images of living water and rolling streams abound. “God’s Love Overflowing” is our 29
attempt to express the amazing riches that flow boundlessly from the triune God who in

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loving freedom seeks and saves us, reconciles and renews us, and draws us into loving 31
relationships that reflect the eternal oneness of God. 32

33

Important background to our work together was the document, “A Report to the Church 34

on Issues of Language and Gender” (2000). The document speaks of “inclusive” 35

language for the people of God and “faithful” language for God, language that plumbs 36
the depths of scripture for rich and varied imagery. Such “faithful” language for God 37
affirms classic trinitarian doctrine while seeking fresh ways to speak of the mystery of the
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triune God. Theological reflection does involve words and language. Like any 39
theological enterprise, we grappled with the limits and possibilities of language for God,
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but these were not our primary concerns. From the outset we have understood our task to
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be a creative and constructive theological reflection that could help our church renew its
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faith in the triune God. 43

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As we prayed, worshiped and worked together, we sought guidance first from scripture,
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from our confessions, from our Reformed and ecumenical theological tradition, and from
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the prayers of the church, past and present. In our reflection, we were ever mindful of the
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struggle to find faithful ways to speak of the God who is love overflowing, to address the
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Trinity in worship and prayer, and to do so in words that faithfully bear witness to the 49
mystery and the presence of the One who is with us and for us. Our work seeks to 50
expand rather than limit our vocabulary of praise and wonder. We have come to believe
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that no name, no metaphor, no set of words or phrases—however thoughtful, poetic or 52
profound--will ever be able to say everything that could be said about the mystery of 53
God’s love made known to us above all in Jesus Christ and sealed in our hearts by the 54
Holy Spirit. 55

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Part I (Confessing God’s Overflowing Love) is confessional; it summarizes our sense of
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the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s theological convictions. Part II (Participating in 58
God’s Overflowing Love) is liturgical; it seeks to show the ways all Christians participate
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in the life of God as we worship together. Part III (Embodying God’s Overflowing Love)
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is missional; here we speak of the concrete ways all Christians are called to embody the
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overflowing love of God in mission and service—in the life of faith, hope and love. We
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hope and pray that our words, though inadequate, are found to be faithful to the triune 63
God whom we seek to worship and serve with heart, soul, mind and strength. 64

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Concluding the task set before us we make the following recommendations to the 217th

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General Assembly: 69

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1. That “The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing” be approved and commended to 71
the church for study. 72

2. That the full text of “The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing” be published in 73
the Minutes of 217th General Assembly (2006). 74

3. That the Office of Theology and Worship and Congregational Ministries and 75
Christian Education be instructed to prepare study materials for “The Trinity: 76
God’s Love Overflowing.” 77

4. That the Office of Theology and Worship be instructed to make “The Trinity: 78
God’s Love Overflowing” available to the church, with study guide, in both 79
print and electronic forms. 80

5. That the Office of Theology and Worship be encouraged to work with 81
Congregational Ministries Publishing and/or Presbyterian Publishing 82
Corporation to make available liturgical resources based on “The Trinity: 83
God’s Love Overflowing.” 84

6. That the Office of Theology and Worship be encouraged to work with 85
Congregational Ministries Publishing and/or Presbyterian Publishing 86
Corporation to make available the historical resources on prayer and worship 87
that underlie “The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing.” 88

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I. CONFESSING GOD'S OVERFLOWING LOVE 109

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Confident in the scriptural witness, in unison with the creeds of the ecumenical church,

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and guided by our Reformed confessions, we place our faith in the triune God alone. 112

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In life and in death we belong to God. Through the grace of our Lord 114

Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we 115

trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we 116

worship and serve (BC, 10.1). 117

118

In company with all the people of God, Presbyterians proclaim the gospel of the triune

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God. In sovereign love God created the heavens and the earth and called and formed the

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people of Israel to be a light to all the nations. In costly grace the Lord Jesus Christ 121

ministered among us and was crucified and raised for us and for our salvation. In 122

transforming power the Holy Spirit renews and sanctifies us, draws us into new 123

communion with God and each other, awakens our praise and worship, and equips us for

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the service of God in the world. The triune God does all this through “the grace of the

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Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit” (2 Cor 13:14).

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The Doctrine of the Trinity as the Summary of the Gospel 129

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We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom 131

we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in 132

our hope of sharing the glory of God.... and hope does not disappoint us, 133

because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy 134

Spirit who has been given to us (Rom 5:1-5). 135

136

The doctrine of the Trinity is a summary of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It cannot be 137

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properly understood apart from this gospel, and the gospel cannot be fully understood

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apart from the doctrine of the Trinity. 139

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According to the witness of scripture, God's love comes to us in a threefold way: God

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loved the world and gave the Son for our salvation (Jn 3:16); Jesus Christ, God's only

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Son our Lord, loved us and gave his life for us (Gal 2:20); the gift of God's love in Christ

143

has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 1:22). The church's confession

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and praise of the triune God is rooted in the threefold self-revelation of the one God who

145

is our creator, our redeemer, and our sanctifier. 146

147

Even before the election of Israel and the coming of Christ, God's creation of the world

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expressed overflowing love. The abundance and diversity of creatures display the

149 majestic beauty of creation. Yet all creation groans for redemption, even as every human

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heart hungers for the fullness of life that only God can give (Rom 8:22-23). As sinful

151 creatures, we know the triune God reliably neither by our observation of the world nor by

152

our exploration of the marvels of our creaturely existence. Rather, we know the great

153 love of the God who is three-in-one and one-in-three truly, tangibly, and decisively only

154

through God's own self-gift in the person and work of Jesus Christ and in the presence

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and power of the Holy Spirit. 156

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In continuity with God's mighty acts among the people of Israel, but also with surprising

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newness, the Word of God was with us and for us uniquely in the person of Jesus who as

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an infant cried in the arms of Mary, who was baptized by John and received the Holy

160 Spirit, who broke bread with sinners and tax collectors, who forgave and healed the

161 paralytic in Capernaum, whose power flowed to the hemorrhaging woman, who taught

162

with authority, who blessed the children, who prayed in agony at Gethsemane, who

163 endured torture and death on the cross at Golgotha, who was raised bodily and in victory

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on Easter morning. 165

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Active in the history of Israel and singularly at work in the life, death, and resurrection of

167

Jesus, God continues to be present and active in and among us as the Spirit, who filled

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the believers at Pentecost, who empowered the apostles to do signs and miracles, who
169
called Philip to evangelize and baptize the Ethiopian eunuch, who gave a variety of gifts
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to the church and formed the body of Christ, who has inspired faith, love, and hope in the
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church across the ages, and who continues to call women and men to all ministries of the
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church. 173
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The church's confession of the triune God is embedded not only in the biblical witness
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but also in the early church's prayer and practice. Christians are baptized (Mt 28:19) and
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blessed (2 Cor 13:14) in the name of the triune God. The apostle Paul describes common
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Christian prayer to God in trinitarian terms: "When we cry 'Abba! Father!' it is that very
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Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then
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heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ..." (Rom 8:15b-17a). The overflowing love
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of God comes to us through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. 181
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The work of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the foundation of all 183
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5
confessional statements about God, humanity, and the world (*BC*, 9.07). 184
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The love of the triune God made known to us in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit is 186
plentiful beyond measure (Rom 5:20). It is given freely and extravagantly. It is utterly
187
unmerited and unexpected. It is always greater than we can imagine or conceive. God's
188
love overflows like a gushing fountain (Jer 2:13; Jn 4:14). It freely pours forth in an 189
inexhaustible stream. It is never diminished in the giving. It never dries up. It is 190
constant and trustworthy. It is more powerful than all the forces of sin and evil that deny
191
and resist the gift and call of the love of God given to us in Jesus Christ and shared with
192
us by the Holy Spirit. It cannot be quenched, even by death itself (Song 8:6-7). 193
194
Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor 195
things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all 196
creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus 197
our Lord (Rom 8:38-39). 198
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The trinitarian understanding of God has been at the heart of the church's message and
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prayer since its beginnings. Far from an ivory tower doctrine, it is a doctrine concerned
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with the truth of God and the reality of our salvation. Only God can save us and sanctify
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us. When we speak of the three distinct but inseparable persons of the Trinity, they are
203
not to be understood, as modalism teaches, as mere masks or temporary roles that hide
204
God's deepest reality. Nor are Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit secondary deities or mere
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creatures of a supposedly solitary supreme God, as subordinationism teaches. The 206
trinitarian faith of the church rejects both these views because they deny that God is truly
207
present as our savior in Jesus Christ and truly present among and in us as the life-giving
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Spirit. Against the views of modalism and subordinationism the church declares in its 209
doctrine of the Trinity that Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are, together with God the 210
Father, fully and eternally God. As the Nicene Creed affirms, Jesus Christ is "God from
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God, Light from Light, true God from true God," and the Holy Spirit is to be worshiped
212
and glorified as "the Lord, the giver of life" (*BC*, 1.1-3). 213
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A Mystery Revealed 216

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The doctrine of the Trinity testifies to a mystery beyond human comprehension. It 218
speaks of the very being of God that exceeds our understanding. 219
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God said to Moses, "I am who I am."... This is my name forever, and this 221
is my title for all generations (*Ex* 3:14-15). 222
223
Our minds cannot fully comprehend and our words and images can never fully explain
224
the mystery of God. But while the name of God is inexhaustible and exceeds our grasp,
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we are not left in ignorance. We are invited to participate in this mystery that has been
226
opened to us by God's own self-disclosure in Jesus Christ and in the coming of the Holy
227
Spirit who binds us to Christ. 228

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No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the
Father's heart, who has made him known (Jn 1:18).
What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him--
These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit;
for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God
The church's confession of the triune God is the right and good interpretation of the
witness of scripture to God revealed in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. It has been so
received in the church universal. It has been repeatedly confirmed in Christian worship
and service. The mystery of the Trinity is an open and radiant mystery.
of the truth that God is holy, abundant, overflowing love both in relationship to us and in
all eternity. We meet God's threefold love in the astonishing faithfulness of the Holy
One of Israel, in the costly grace given to us in Jesus Christ our Savior, and in the new
life in communion with God and others that has come to us in the gift of the Holy Spirit.
We dare to speak of God as eternally triune because this is the way the Holy One has
come to us and revealed God's own heart to us. The triune God is self-giving not only in
relation to us, but also in the depths of the eternal divine life. In the unity of their mutual
love the three persons of the Trinity are the divine reality from before the earth was
formed and to all eternity. We know this to be true because God is faithful. God is not
one way in relation to us and another way in God's own eternal being. There is no God
behind the One who has come to us in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. We therefore
confidently affirm that the doctrine of the Trinity is neither presumptuous speculation nor
mathematical nonsense. About this the church must have no doubt: the doctrine of the
Trinity proclaims to us the very heart of God, made known to us in the sacrificial love of
Jesus Christ and poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.
When we confess with the creeds of the universal church that God is "one in substance,
and yet distinct in three persons" (BC, 3.01), we use terminology that is strange and
perhaps off-putting to many members of the church today. However, the intent of these

words is to declare that the mystery of the Trinity cannot be reduced either to a solitary
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individual or to a close-knit group of individuals. Trinitarian faith witnesses to the divine
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reality as living, active, dynamic, and relational. Relationship is at the heart of God's 265
being. One yet richly differentiated, God's being is in communion. God lives and acts in
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mutual, self-giving love. 267
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It would be presumptuous to speculate about the inner life of God on the strength of our
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own reason or imagination. Lurking in such speculation is the danger of making God 270
after our own image or according to our own wishes and desires. Yet if we keep to the
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witness of scripture, we can be confident that confessing faith in the triune God is not 272
fueled by idle speculation. It is shaped by the outpouring of God's abundant love for us
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in Jesus Christ and in us by the Holy Spirit. We trust that the way God acts in relation to
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us corresponds to who God is in all eternity. Before the world was created, and after it
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shall have come to its end, God is none other than the one who is for us once for all in
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Jesus Christ and with us here and now by the Holy Spirit. 277
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Three in One, One in Three 280

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In the history of the church's thinking and speaking about the Trinity, two analogies have
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been especially prominent. One likens the Trinity to the capacities of an individual 283
human mind. Just as a human being is one and the same in each of the three distinct acts
284
of remembering, knowing, and willing, so God exists as one-in-three and three-in-one.
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Often called the psychological analogy, this way of thinking places the emphasis on the
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one-in-threeness of God. The other analogy likens the Trinity to a loving communion of
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persons. As human beings find their deepest identity in relationships of mutual love, so
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God exists as three-in-one and one-in-three in the ineffable exchange of love among the
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three persons of the Trinity. Often called the social analogy or analogy of human life in

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relationship, this way of thinking places the emphasis on the three-in-oneness of God.

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Neither of these analogies should be pressed too far. On the one hand, pressing the 293 analogy of the different capacities of a single human mind may reduce God to a solitary 294

individual, neglecting the reality of personal relationship within God's being. On the 295 other hand, pressing the social or relational analogy runs the risk of portraying God as 296

three separate individuals who decide to work in concert with each other. This would be 297

tantamount to tritheism or belief in three gods. Fortunately, we do not have to choose 298 between these analogies of single personhood and personal life in community. The 299 church has never declared one of these analogies right and the other wrong. Instead, it 300

has rejected the dangers to which each of these analogies may lead if pushed too far. 301 Within Reformed theology, some have favored the single person analogy while others 302

have favored the analogy of communion (*koinonia*) and mutual love. Representatives of 303

both analogies have agreed that the unity and differentiation of the triune God are unique. 304

There is a mutual indwelling or interpenetration (*perichoresis*) of the three persons of 305 the

Trinity in an ineffable unity. 306

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The mystery of the Trinity is reverently expressed by Gregory of Nazianzus: "No sooner 308

do I conceive of the one than I am illumined by the splendor of the three; no sooner do I 309

distinguish them than I am carried back to the one" (*On Baptism*, Oration 40.41). 310 311

312

Naming the Triune God 313

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In recent years new ways of speaking of the Trinity in the prayer and theology of the 315 church have been proposed. Some of these proposals are helpful; some are 316 unsatisfactory. What must be clear is that we cannot distinguish the persons of the Trinity 317

simply by assigning different attributes or acts to each of the persons. The divine 318 attributes are held in common by all three persons: all are holy, all are loving, all are wise 319

and powerful. Similarly, an action of God cannot be restricted to one of the three 320 persons. All of the acts of the triune God are indivisible. The persons of the Trinity do 321

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not work independently. Each of God's acts is always the one work of the whole Trinity.

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For example, while the first person of the Trinity is often referred to as the "Creator," this

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must not be understood to exclude the involvement of the second and the third persons in

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the work of creation. Thus while the triad "Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier" appropriately

326

names distinct aspects of God's relationship to the world, it does not properly designate

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the relationships of the triune persons to each other. In the life of the triune God the three

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persons are uniquely distinguished and uniquely united by their mutual relationships. 329

Each person gives and receives love from the others in a distinctive way. 330

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In what ways may we speak faithfully of the mystery of the Trinity today? In many 332

ways. With the witness of scripture, the ecumenical creeds, and the Reformed 333

confessions and liturgies, we regularly speak of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The

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Presbyterian Church (USA) respects and values this way of speaking of the triune God,

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resisting any tendency to discard or diminish it. The language of Father, Son, and Holy

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Spirit, rooted in scripture and creed, remains an indispensable anchor for our efforts to

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speak faithfully of God. When properly secured, an anchor provides both necessary 338

stability and adequate freedom of movement. If our lifeline to the anchor is frayed or 339

severed, the historic faith of the one holy catholic and apostolic church risks being set

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adrift. 341

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With this anchor in place, however, we are liberated to interpret, amplify, and expand 343

upon the ways of naming the triune God familiar to most church members. We are freed

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to speak faithfully and amply of the mystery of the Trinity. We may cultivate a 345

responsible trinitarian imagination and vocabulary that bears witness in different ways to

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the one triune God known to us from scripture and creed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

347

Faithfulness to the gospel frees us to honor and continue to use traditional ways of 348

speaking of the triune God even as it frees us to adopt new images and names. Rather 349

than simply repeating the word "God" in prayer and liturgy, we are free to broaden our

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vocabulary for speaking of the triune God, emboldened by the rich reservoir of biblical

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and traditional terms, names, images, and metaphors. 352

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All names of the triune God employ analogy. When we confess that the Father eternally

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“begets” the Son, that the Son is eternally “begotten” of the Father, and that the Holy 355
Spirit eternally “proceeds” from the Father and the Son (*BC*, 1.2,3; 5.016; 7.120), we 356
speak analogically. Talk of a “begetting,” a “being begotten,” and a “proceeding” in God

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has never been understood by the church in the literal sense of human reproduction. 358

Rather, these words point to the triune God as a living and dynamic personal reality 359

whose unity is inclusive of distinctive relationships of love. 360

361

The language of Father, Son, and Spirit has too often been misunderstood to sanction 362
hierarchies that some human beings arbitrarily impose on others. However, a properly

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trinitarian understanding of God is indispensable in empowering faithful resistance to 364
oppressive uses of human power that are rooted in hierarchy and subordination. 365

Similarly, trinitarian language has been used to support the idea that God is male and that 366

men are superior to women. For this and other distortions of trinitarian doctrine we 367

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repent. God is not male (*BC*, 6.011). Question 51 in “Belonging to God: A First 368
Catechism” asks: “When we pray to God as our Father, do we mean that God is male?”

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and answers: “No. Only creatures who have bodies can be male or female. But God is

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Spirit and has no body.” A properly trinitarian understanding of God makes it clear that

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the Creator of gender is not subject to it. 372

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As we explore diverse possibilities for trinitarian images, we are mindful of the 374
temptation to bring the mystery of God under our control. Therefore, we must always be 375

guided by the words of scripture and creed that speak of God as Father, Son, and Holy

376

Spirit. We are instructed by the creedal description of one who “begets,” one who is 377
“begotten,” and one who “proceeds,” even as we recognize the limits of this language.

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379

At the same time, we should not insist on the exclusive use of the traditional trinitarian

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names, lest we quench the Spirit and even foster idolatry. Such a view would 381

insufficiently acknowledge the divine mystery, would neglect the freedom of God’s 382

children to glorify God imaginatively with all our hearts and minds, and would diminish 383

383

the joy of knowing God ever more fully. 384
Female imagery of the triune God has yet to be adequately explored. The overflowing
385
love of God finds expression in the biblical depiction of God as compassionate mother
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(Isa 49:15; 66:13), beloved child (Mt 3:17), and life-giving womb (Isa 46:3). The divine
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wisdom (*hochmah* in Hebrew, *Sophia* in Greek) is portrayed in the Bible as a woman
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who preaches in the streets, gives instruction, advocates justice, builds houses, and acts as
389
a gracious hostess (Prov 1,8,9). 390
Responding to objections that the title “Father” is “more appropriate” to God, John 391
Calvin reminds us “that no figures of speech can describe God’s extraordinary affection
392
towards us; for it is infinite and various.” He further explains that God “has manifested
393
himself to be both...Father and Mother” so that we might be more aware of God’s 394
constant presence and willingness to assist us (*Commentary on Isaiah* 46:3). God “did
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not satisfy himself with proposing the example of a father,” writes Calvin, “but in order
396
to express his very strong affection, he chose to liken himself to a mother, and calls [the
397
people of Israel] not merely ‘children,’ but *the fruit of the womb*, towards which there is
398
usually a warmer affection” (*Commentary on Isaiah* 49:15). 399
Maternal imagery reminds us that God is a mother who expends herself for us, sheltering
400
us like an eagle hovering over her young and bearing us on her wings (Ex 19:4; Deut 401
32:11). Carried by and born of the Virgin Mary, the child of God shares life with us, 402
working to establish justice, righteousness, and peace (Isa 9:7; Lk 2: 46-55). As we are
403
born of flesh and blood, so we are also born again by the Spirit of God (Jn 3:30-6). The
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Spirit lifts us up and carries us throughout life (Isa 46:1-4). 405

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A Plenitude of Images of the Trinity 408

Recognizing that all language about the triune God refers beyond itself by way of 409
analogy, we draw on scripture and our confessions to speak of the triune God in 410
historically faithful yet freshly imaginative ways. The analogies employed in the 411
following list have not been chosen at random. They are guided by God’s self-revelation
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as attested in scripture. Some seek to reflect the relationships among the three persons of
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the Trinity whose love overflows for our salvation, and all intend to fairly depict the 414
triune God's ways in the world. Some triads have a narrative quality; others are drawn
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from creation. While classical trinitarian theology speaks of the "first, second, and third"
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persons of the Trinity, scripture also refers to the three in other patterns, as in the 417
apostolic benediction which invokes "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,
418

and the communion of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor 13:13). 419

As we worship, the triune God is the One From Whom, the One through Whom, 420
and the One in Whom we offer our praise (Rom 11:36). 421

422

As we seek God's grace and wholeness, acknowledging the sin and brokenness in 423
us, our human communities, and the whole creation, the triune God is our 424

Rainbow of Promise, our Ark of Salvation, and our Dove of Peace (see Ramshaw, 425
p. 351). 426

427

As we read, proclaim, hear, and live out the message of scripture, the triune God 428
is known to us as Speaker, Word, and Breath (Heb 1:1; Jn 1:1; Jn 20:22; Ps 429
104:30). 430

431

In baptism, the triune God is for us Overflowing Font, Living Water, Flowing 432
River (BCW, p.412; Jn 4:10, 13-14; Jn 7:37). 433

434

As we are born anew by water and the Spirit, the triune God is Compassionate 435
Mother, Beloved Child, and Life-giving Womb (Isa 49:15; Mt. 3:17; Isa 46:3). 436

437

As we grow in grace, the triune God is our Sun, Light, and Burning Ray (John of 438
Damascus, *First Apology* 11). □ 439

440

As we offer ourselves, our resources, and our gratitude in stewardship and 441
Eucharist, the triune God is Giver, Gift, and Giving (Jas 1:17; Jn 3:16; 2 Cor 9:15; 442
1 Jn 3:24). 443

444

In celebrating the communion of our life together in Christ, the triune God is 445
Lover, Beloved, and the Love and binds together Lover and Beloved (Augustine, 446

The Trinity 8.14, 15.10). 447

448

As members of the believing community, we acknowledge the triune God as our 449
Rock, Cornerstone, and Temple (Ps 28:1; Eph 2:20-21). 450

451

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11

When we speak of God's wrath in the face of evil, the triune God is for us Fire 452
that Consumes, Sword that Divides, and Storm that Melts Mountains (Deut 5:25; 453

Mt 10:34-35; Ps 97:5). 454

455

As we seek to live in faith, love, and hope, the triune God is for us the One Who 456
Was, the One Who Is, and the One Who Is To Come (Rev 4:8). 457

458

In these and other ways we stammer to confess that the triune God is an inexhaustible 459

mystery of purifying and transforming love. God abides in eternal communion. Divine 460

life is giving and receiving, sharing and delighting in reciprocal love. Abundant, 461
overflowing love is the glory, majesty, and beauty of the triune God. By the grace of the 462

Lord Jesus Christ and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we are invited to participate in 463

the eternal life of the triune God who is love (1 Jn 4: 8). 464

465

466

The Doctrine of the Trinity and Christian Practice 467

468

The church's faith and life will be enriched as we learn and live into the triune reality of 469

God. Faithfully articulated, the doctrine of the Trinity teaches that Jesus Christ our 470
Savior and the Holy Spirit our Sanctifier are truly one with God who made the heavens 471

and the earth and who called Israel to be a light to all nations. God is not a solitary and 472

self-enclosed being (as we often imagine God to be and as we often aspire to be). The 473

eternal triune God wills to communicate with creatures and to share the divine life and 474

love with them. God's being is in mutual love and shared life. God is the gift-giving 475
God. This is the way God has related to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus 476
Christ and in the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, and it reveals who God is and how God 477

acts in all eternity. 478

479

The love of the triune God is full and free. In the triune life of God and in the triune 480
God's relation to us, there is no withholding of life and love, no reservation, no 481
qualification, no half-heartedness in giving. God's triune life is described by ancient 482
church tradition as a *perichoresis*: a mutual indwelling, mutual interaction, and mutual 483

interpenetration of the persons of the Trinity in eternal life and communion. In this 484
everlasting and interactive divine communion, each lives with, in and for the others. All 485

is held in common except the distinctiveness of the persons in their reciprocal 486
relationships of love. Confessing God as triune, we affirm that this eternal life-in- 487

communion of the triune God is freely and gladly extended to us and to the world. 488
489
This trinitarian way of thinking and speaking of God transforms our understanding of the
490
power of God and of fruitful human power. True power, the creative and life-giving 491
power that originates with the triune God, is not dominating and coercive power. It is not
492
power that manipulates and overwhelms. True power is life-giving, life-enabling, life-
493
empowering power. True power is the power strong enough to live for and with another.
494
It is the power strong enough to be vulnerable for another, to suffer with and for another,
495
to rejoice with and for another, to give one's all for another. The power of the triune God
496
is the power of omnipotent, shared love. 497
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12
498
The overflowing love of God given to us in Jesus Christ and shared with us by the Holy
499
Spirit draws us out of ourselves and into life in right relationship with God and others.
500
Human beings are created in and for relationship. We bear witness to the triune God by
501
our life in relationship. Knowledge of the triune God and knowledge of ourselves are 502
inseparable (Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.i.1). This does not mean that we can use the doctrine of
503
the Trinity as a kind of blueprint for human life or as a program for the renovation of 504
human society. But this much we can surely say: If God's life is in communion, then 505
human life, too, created in the image of God, is intended by God to be life in communion.
506
From this perspective, sin often takes the form of rejecting life in relationship, of wanting
507
to live only for oneself, of actively and intentionally disobeying the laws of God, of 508
wanting to live apart from God, or of living as though our sisters and brothers did not 509
exist or were there only for our benefit. But sin may also take the form of self- 510
devaluation and self-hatred, of wanting to disappear into another, of neglecting God's 511
purpose because we do not feel worthy of it, or of trying to hide one's personhood and
512
unique talents. In whatever form, living in bondage to sin is living against the grain of
513
reality as constituted by the triune God, in whom depth of communion and personal 514
differentiation are inseparable. God wills all creation to participate in this triune life of
515
communion. 516
517

The doctrine of the Trinity is not an abstract theory but a practical doctrine. As with all
518
Christian doctrines, a right understanding of this doctrine is far more than mere assent to
519
a set of propositions. The truth of the doctrine of the Trinity must be claimed with our
520
whole heart, mind, and strength. It must be put into practice in our everyday life. It has
521
its roots in the proclamation of the gospel and in the church's life of prayer. By 522
practicing our faith in worship and service, we take part in the life and love of the triune
523
God. We enter into the realm of God's community-forming love, which is able to 524
reconcile sinners and make enemies into friends. As we worship and praise the God made
525
known in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, as we attend to the preaching of
526
the Word of God and the celebration of the sacraments of baptism and Lord's Supper, as
527
we assist our neighbor, forgive our enemy, and live in friendship with all people, we take
528
part in the life-giving and peace-making love of the triune God. In Christian faith, hope,
529
and love, we are united with God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. In our 530
common worship, common prayer, and common service of our neighbor, we are being
531
formed and nurtured in the overflowing love of the triune God. 532

533

534

The Doctrine of the Trinity and Christian Mission 535

536

Christian service and mission, too, are shaped and guided by the missions of the triune
537

God. God has sent Jesus Christ to accomplish our reconciliation with God and sends the
538

Holy Spirit to bring us to new life in Christ and to renew the whole creation. 539

540

The mission of the church is a participation in the mission of the triune God. The 541
church's mission is not determined by our own special interests and favorite agendas. In
542

Jesus Christ "God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19; *BC* 9.07). The 543
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13

Holy Spirit is the Bond of Peace (Eph 4:3) who brings together in new unity people of
544

many languages, nations, cultures, and races. The Spirit works toward the full realization
545

of God's reign of justice and peace. The mission of the church is established and directed
 546
 by the reconciling and community-building activity of the triune God. 547
 548
 Participating in this mission, we extend the reconciling and peace-making love of God to
 549
 others. We share the good news. We show compassion to the needy. We work with 550
 others for justice, freedom, and peace. We practice forgiveness. We welcome strangers
 551
 and the outcast. We use our gifts to build up the church, which is Christ's body. We 552
 encourage friendship and community among all people. We take part, always 553
 imperfectly and provisionally, in the overflowing, self-giving, community-forming love
 554
 of God that is the mystery of the Trinity. The triune God who is and calls us to take part
 555
 in life in communion is the object of our faith, the basis of our love, and the goal of our
 556
 hope. 557
 558
 The church looks with eager longing to the consummation of life in the triune God who is
 559
 overflowing love. With the *Brief Statement of Faith* of the Presbyterian Church (USA),
 560
 we declare: 561
 562
 In life and in death we belong to God. 563
 Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, 564
 The love of God, 565
 And the communion of the Holy Spirit, 566
 We trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, 567
 whom alone we worship and serve. 568
 (*Brief Statement of Faith*, BC 10:1). 569
 570
 571

II. PARTICIPATING IN GOD'S OVERFLOWING LOVE 572

All of Christian life is a participation in the abundant love of the triune God. In our
 worship of God, we bring participation to awareness and speech. Each act of worship
 praising, confessing, forgiving, proclaiming, professing, baptizing, thanksgiving,
 offering, sharing, praying, blessing, sending – nurtures our faith in this Trinity of love.
 578
 Our need and desire to worship confront us with the inadequacy of our language for God.
 579
 With all the saints, “we are forced to raise our lowly words to subjects which cannot be
 580

described” (Hilary of Poitiers, *The Trinity* 2.2). We worship the triune God who
transcends even our best efforts to sing or speak, to preach or praise. John Calvin
declared, “If all that can be said or imagined about love were brought together into one,
yet it would be surpassed by the greatness of the love of God. By no metaphor, therefore,
can God’s incomparable goodness be described” (*Commentary on Isaiah* 46:3).
Yet our faith will not let us keep silent. In a favorite hymn we pray, “O for a thousand
tongues to sing my dear redeemer’s praise” (Charles Wesley, *PH #466*). Our praying,
praising, worshipping language is a reflection of the overflowing love of God’s triune
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14
beauty. We come to see the classic trinitarian idiom, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, as a
root out of which grows an ever-richer vocabulary of praise. We draw from the deep well
of scripture and from the prayers of the church, past and present, to expand and enrich the
ways we speak of God and to God. Thus we hope to deepen our participation in the
abundant love of God – the one in three, the three in one.
The Reformed tradition has always looked to the Psalms as a rich fund of images for
God, whom we proclaim as “our rock and fortress, our stronghold and deliverer, our
shield, in whom we take refuge” (Ps 144:2). The reformation of liturgy in the sixteenth
century was a move toward understanding, simplicity, and a focus on the Word of God.
The rich imagery of the Psalms found voice in an outpouring of psalm paraphrases set to
metrical melodies. The devotional literature of the church continues to draw from the
spiritual imagination of the faithful. Reformed worship is now recovering the spirituality
and prayer of the larger Christian tradition. This recovery is accompanied by a renewed
interest in sung praise, including psalmody. Recovery of the full liturgical tradition of the
church and renewal of the Reformed tradition of sung psalms are crucial resources for our
faithful worship of the triune God.
The sixteenth century Reformation was characterized by a “return to the sources,”
especially scripture and the theology of the early church. Yet the reformation of the
church did not mean the rejection of all that had gone before. Calvin himself encouraged
“an assiduous reading of the ancient writers” (*Institutes*, IV.xviii.9). Contemporary

conversations with other Christian churches have helped Presbyterians to rediscover and
612

reformulate our liturgical roots. 613

614

The Service for the Lord's Day in the *Book of Common Worship* is ordered around
four 615

basic movements: "Gathering," "The Word," "Thanksgiving," and "Sending." These 616
basic movements, described in the *Directory for Worship*, provide a helpful outline for
617

our reflection on worship of the triune God. 618

619

Gathering 620

Call to Worship 621

Prayer 622

Praise 623

Confession and Pardon 624

Peace 625

The Word 626

Prayer for Illumination 627

Scripture Readings and Psalm 628

Proclamation 629

Affirmation of Faith 630

Baptism 631

Prayers of the People 632

Thanksgiving 633

Offering 634

Eucharist 635

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15

Sending 636

Charge and Blessing 637

Dismissal 638

639

640

GATHERING 641

642

Gather us in and hold us forever, 643

Gather us in and make us your own; 644

Gather us in, all peoples together, 645

Fire of love in our flesh and our bone (Marty Haugen, STF #2236). 646

647

Call to Worship 648

649

God brings all things into being by the Word. 650

God offers the Word of grace, 651

and people respond to that divine initiative 652
through the language of worship (Directory for Worship, W-1.2001). 653
The Spirit moves them to respond by naming and calling upon God, 654
by remembering and proclaiming God's acts of self-revelation in word and deed,
655
and by committing their lives to God's reign in the world 656
(Directory for Worship, W-1.1002). 657

658

We are called to worship by the triune God whose gracious love invites our grateful 659
response. It is God who calls us to worship, not we ourselves, and so we are beckoned by
660

words of scripture that voice the fullness of Promise, Salvation, and Peace. 661
662

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; 663

The whole earth is full of God's glory. 664

I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, 665

Who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. 666

667

668

Prayer and Praise 669

670

Joyful, joyful we adore Thee, 671

God of Glory, Lord of Love...(Henry Van Dyke, PH #464). 672

673

Christian worship joyfully ascribes all praise and honor, 674

glory and power to the triune God 675

(Directory for Worship, W-1.001). 676

In prayer, 677

through the Holy Spirit, 678

people seek after and are found by the one true God 679

who has been revealed through Jesus Christ 680

(Directory for Worship, W-2.1001). 681

682

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16

In worship we seek to embody our calling to glorify and enjoy God forever (*BC* 7.001,
683

7.111). Our worship begins with praise. "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!"

684

(*Ps* 150:6). We come to worship as creatures in the presence of the Creator, as beloved in
685

the presence of the Lover, as humanity in the presence of the Holy One. We strain to 686
give voice to the holiness, majesty, and mercy of God. And so the vocabulary of praise is
687

expansive, rich, all-embracing. 688

689

In praising the triune God we use biblical language, both classic – 690
 Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, 691
 and surprising – 692
 Mother, Child, and Womb. 693
 We may use words that speaks of the inner relations of the Godhead – 694
 Lover, Beloved, Love, 695
 and those that speak of the loving activity of the Three among us – 696
 Creator, Savior, Sanctifier, 697
 Rock, Redeemer, Friend, 698
 King of Glory, Prince of Peace, Spirit of Love. 699
 700
 Heartfelt praise of the triune God marks the beginning of all our worship: 701
 702
 God of all glory, 703
 on this first day you began creation, 704
 bringing light out of darkness. 705
 On this first day you began your new creation, 706
 raising Jesus Christ out of the darkness of death. 707
 On this Lord's Day, grant that we, 708
 the people you create by water and the Spirit, 709
 may be joined with all your works 710
 in praising you for your great glory. 711
 Through Jesus Christ, 712
 in union with the Holy Spirit, 713
 we praise you now and forever. Amen (*Book of Common Worship*, p. 45). 714
 715
 716

Confession and Pardon 717

718
Lord, let your love, love with no end, come over us, 719
That we may be saved; that we may have light 720
To find our way in the darkest night, 721
Let your love come over us 722
("Shine On Us," Michael W. Smith and Deborah D. Smith). 723
 724
The believing community announces the good news of God 725
whose love gives people grace to confess their sin and complicity in brokenness,
 726
to repent, expressing sorrow and intention to change, 727
to accept God's forgiveness and extend that forgiveness to another, 728
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 17
to forgive the other and accept the other's forgiveness, 729
to work toward reconciliation in brokenness, 730
to trust the power of God to bring healing and peace 731
(Directory for Worship, W-6.3009). 732

733

As we offer our praise to the Holy One, we see more clearly our relationship to God, to
734

ourselves, and to one another. In the presence of the Trinity, who is overflowing love, 735
grace, and communion, we are confronted by our own loveless, ungracious, and self- 736
absorbed ways. This overflowing triune love also has the power to overcome our sins of
737

self-devaluation and our feelings of worthlessness. The God who forgives is at once 738
powerful, wise, and tender: 739

740

Power of the eternal Father, help me! 741

Wisdom of the Son, enlighten the eye of my understanding! 742

Tender clemency of the Holy Spirit, 743

enflame my heart and unite it to yourself! (Catherine of Siena, *Prayer 5*). 744

745

Through the ages, believers have used the threefold *Kyrie* (Lord, have mercy) in the act
746

of confession, seeking mercy from the triune God. This ancient form is echoed in a 747
contemporary prayer of confession: 748

749

Holy God, Maker of us all; have mercy on us. 750

Jesus Christ, Servant of the poor, have mercy on us. 751

Holy Spirit, Breath of life, have mercy on us 752

(*Iona Abbey Worship Book*, p. 23). 753

754

In Reformed worship, we approach the holy grace of God with boldness; an assurance of
755

pardon accompanies an act of confession: 756

757

The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. 758

I declare unto you, in the name of Jesus Christ, 759

You are forgiven. 760

May the God of mercy, 761

Who forgives you all your sins, 762

Strengthen you in all goodness, 763

And by the power of the Holy Spirit 764

Keep you in eternal life. Amen (*Book of Common Worship*, p. 56). 765

766

A prayer of confession for Epiphany from the *Book of Common Worship* concludes
with 767

the light of the triune God reflected in the forgiven believer: 768

769

God of glory. . . 770

In your mercy, cleanse us of our sin, 771

and baptize us once again with your Spirit, 772

that, forgiven and renewed, we may show forth your glory 773

shining in the face of Jesus Christ (*Book of Common Worship*, p. 193). 774

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18

775

Confession and Pardon are at once personal and corporate. As we have been forgiven in

776

Christ, so we forgive one another, sharing in the peace of God who is Grace, Love, and

777

Communion (2 Cor 13:13). 778

779

780

THE WORD 781

782

Be Thou my wisdom, and Thou my true word; 783

I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord. 784

Heart of my own heart, whatever befall, 785

Still be my vision, O Ruler of all (PH #339). 786

787

Prayer for Illumination 788

Scripture Readings and Psalm 789

Proclamation 790

Affirmation 791

792

The church confesses the scriptures to be the Word of God written, 793

Witnessing to God's self-revelation. 794

Where that Word of God is read and proclaimed, 795

Jesus Christ the Living Word is present 796

By the inward witness of the Holy Spirit 797

(Directory for Worship, W-2.2001). 798

799

The assurance of forgiveness clears our senses for the hearing of God's Word. A prayer

800

for illumination prepares the gathered community to share in the reading and 801

proclamation of the Word. 802

803

Meanwhile, let my mind meditate on it, 804

let my tongue speak of it, 805

let my heart love it, 806

let my mouth preach it, 807

let my soul hunger for it, 808

my flesh thirst for it, 809

and my whole being desire it, 810

until I enter into the joy of my Lord, 811

who is God one and triune, blessed forever. 812

Amen (Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogian* 789-797). 813

814

The Holy Spirit is poured out on the gathered community, hearer and speaker alike. “. . .

815

Through the Holy Spirit we know Christ, who is God and the Son of God, and in the Son

816

we see the Father. The Word is the messenger who makes the divine nature perceptible

817

to us, and the Spirit is the interpreter of the Word” (John of Damascus, *Third Apology*

818

18). As the scriptures are read, the people are invited to take part, and to listen attentively

819

through prayerful responses: 820

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19

821

For the Word of God in scripture, 822

For the Word of God among us, 823

For the Word of God within us, 824

Thanks be to God (*Iona Abbey Worship Book*, p. 18). 825

826

With the sixteenth-century Protestant reformers we believe that “the preaching of the 827

Word of God is the Word of God” (BC 5.004) and so proclamation lies at the center of

828

our worship. Preaching is a trinitarian event, enjoining the entire worshiping community.

829

The Word written, the Word incarnate, and the Word proclaimed are spoken, heard, and

830

taken to heart. The very Word that called all things into being calls us into service by the

831

power of the Spirit. 832

833

What goes before prepares us for this proclamation; what follows is our response, an 834

affirmation of our common faith. Just as our words, however strong and true, cannot do

835

justice to the triune God, so no creed or confession can encompass the mystery of our 836

triune faith. Yet we continue to preserve and reform and rediscover formulations of what

837

we believe: 838

839

Lord, heavenly Father, you are my heart. 840

Lord Jesus Christ, you are my body. 841

Lord Holy Spirit, you are my breath. 842

Lord, Holy Trinity, you are my only refuge 843

and my eternal rest! (Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Flowing Light* 5.6). 844

845

In our preaching, in our hearing, in our understanding, the triune God is for us 846

Speaker, Word, and Breath. 847

848

849

Baptism 850

851

Baptized by water, Sealed by the Spirit, 852

Marked with the sign of Christ, our King; 853

Born of the Spirit, We are God's children, 854

Joyfully now God's praises we sing (PH #492). 855

856

In Baptism, the Holy Spirit binds the church in covenant to its Creator and Lord.

857

Baptism unites the people of God with each other and with the church of every time and 858

place. Barriers of race, gender, status, and age are to be transcended. 859

Barriers of nationality, history, and practice are to be overcome 860

(Directory for Worship, W-2.3003, 2.3005). 861

862

Trinitarian language entered the worship and theology of the early church through the

863

practice of baptism. Across time and space, Christians have followed Christ's command

864

to baptize new disciples "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"

865

(Matt. 28:19). We regard this classical language of baptism not as a magic formula, but as

866

a concrete link to our many brothers and sisters in Christ. We repeat the language of 867

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20

Matthew 28:19 in baptism to demonstrate our ecumenical commitment to join hands with

868

all Christians and to show forth the unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church.

869

We are also free to supplement this language with additional trinitarian images to reflect

870

the expansive grace, love, and communion of the one God. 871

872

In accordance with scripture, though we are many, in baptism we affirm one body and

873

one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God (Eph 4:4-6). The 874

community of the baptized is bound together by the overflowing love of God which 875

unites us to Christ in his death and resurrection, makes us alive to God, and sets us free to

876

live according to the Spirit (Rom 6-8). The baptism of Jesus reveals the triune presence in

877

the descent of the Spirit and the voice from heaven proclaiming, "This is my Son, the 878

Beloved." 879

880

Our baptismal prayer of thanksgiving expresses our joy in the fullness of the triune 881
God's overflowing love: 882

883

Eternal and gracious God, we give you thanks. 884
in countless ways you have revealed yourself in ages past, 885
and have blessed us with signs of your grace. 886

887

We praise you that through the waters of the sea, 888
you led your people Israel out of bondage, 889
into freedom in the land of your promise. 890

891

We praise you for sending Jesus your Son, 892
who for us was baptized in the waters of the Jordan, 893
and was anointed as the Christ by your Holy Spirit. 894
Through the baptism of his death and resurrection, 895
you set us free from the bondage of sin and death, 896
and give us cleansing and rebirth. 897

898

We praise you that in baptism 899
you give us your Holy Spirit, 900
who teaches us and leads us into all truth, 901
filling us with a variety of gifts, 902
that we might proclaim the gospel to all nations 903
and serve you as a royal priesthood. 904

905

Pour out your Spirit upon us 906
and upon this water, 907
that this font may be your womb of new birth. 908
May all who now pass through these waters 909
be delivered from death to life, 910
from bondage to freedom, 911
from sin to righteousness. 912

Bind them to the household of faith, 913

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21

guard them from all evil. 914
Strengthen them to serve you with joy 915
until the day you make all things new. 916
To you be all praise, honor, and glory; 917
through Jesus Christ our Savior, 918
who, with you and the Holy Spirit, 919
lives and reigns forever (*Book of Common Worship*, pp. 411-412). 920

921

In the waters of baptism we can see that God is 922
Overflowing Font, Living Water, Flowing River 923
(*BCW*, p. 412; Jn 4:10, 13-14; Jn 7:37). 924

When at baptism we remember the stories of salvation, we tell of the God whose
faithfulness is known in

Rainbow, Ark, and Dove (Gen 8-9). 927

928

929

THANKSGIVING 930

931

Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices! 932

Who wondrous things hath done, in whom this world rejoices! (PH #555)

933

934

Offering 935

936

As the Holy Spirit has graced each member with particular gifts 937

for strengthening the body of Christ for mission, 938

so worship should provide opportunities to recognize these gifts 939

and to offer them to serve Christ in the church and in the world 940

(Directory for Worship, W-2.5002). 941

942

All that we are – in our creation as in our salvation – is a gift from the triune God. With

943

gratitude and thanksgiving, we offer ourselves for service, we offer our prayers for the

944

life of the world, and we offer our gifts for the mission and ministry of Christ. 945

946

When we offer our whole lives for God, we commonly speak words of scripture: 947

948

Now there are varieties of gifts, 949

but the same Spirit; 950

and there are varieties of services, 951

but the same Lord; 952

and there are varieties of activities, 953

but it is the same God who activates 954

all of them in everyone (1 Cor 12:4-6). 955

956

These words remind us of the interplay of variety and oneness – in God's relationships

957

with the community of faith as well as within the church. The call to discipleship comes

958

first in our baptism, and is renewed in the call to participate fully in the household of 959

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22

faith. In the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God becomes concrete in our lives

960

and we begin to partake of the divine life and to share in the abundant love of the triune

961

God. 962

963

As we hear the divine call, we respond in prayer. In our intercessions, we call on the triune God in language that reflects our deepest longings, desires, and concerns. 964

966

Come, Holy Spirit, and bring from heaven a ray of Thy light! 967

Come, Thou father of the poor, Thou giver of gifts, Thou light of the world, 968

the blessed Comforter, the dear guest of the soul, and its sweetest refreshment; 969

Thou, our repose in labor, our coolness in heat, our comfort in affliction! 970

(Bernard of Clairvaux, *Prayers*, pp. 62-3). 971

972

We approach the triune God who has promised to intercede on our behalf (Rom 8:26-27).

973

974

Gracious God, 975

because we are not strong enough 976

to pray as we should, you provide Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit 977

to intercede for us in power. 978

In this confidence we ask you 979

to accept our prayers (*Book of Common Worship*, p. 103). 980

981

Prayers of intercession begin to move our hearts outward, toward others, overflowing into

982

the world God loves. 983

984

O God of all creation who has come to us in Jesus, 985

lead us in your way of love and fill us with your Spirit. 986

Choose us to bring good news to the poor, 987

to proclaim liberty to the captives, 988

to bring sight to the blind and set free the oppressed. 989

So shall your new creation come and your will be done 990

(*Iona Abbey Worship Book*, pp. 84-85). 991

992

God is gracious toward us. Our joyful response is gratitude. And so the offering of material goods has been part of Christian worship since the beginning (Acts 2:42-47). In

994

the act of giving, our gifts are blessed by God and set apart for ministry. 995

996

Thou hast accepted the gifts, offerings, and fruits brought unto Thee as an odor of 997

a sweet spiritual smell, and hast been pleased to sanctify them, and make them 998

perfect, O good One, by the grace of Thy Christ, and by the presence of Thy all- 999

holy Spirit (*The Divine Liturgy of St. James* 38). 1000

1001

As we share our gifts of energy, of prayer, and of money, we are living our faith in the

1002

world. 1003

1004

the world the Holy One loves, 1005

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23

the world the Powerful Christ came to save, 1006

the world in which the Comforting Spirit breathes and blows. 1007

1008

In this act of gift sharing, we recognize the Trinity as 1009

1010

Giver, Gift, and Giving; 1011

Truth, Goodness, and, Beauty; 1012

Sun, Light, and Burning Ray. 1013

1014

1015

Eucharist 1016

1017

Here, O our Lord, we see You face to face, 1018

Here would we touch and handle things unseen... (PH #520). 1019

1020

The New Testament describes the meal as a participation in Christ and with one another 1021

in the expectation of the Kingdom and as a foretaste of the messianic banquet.

1022

In remembering, believers receive and trust the love of Christ present to them and to the 1023

world; they manifest the reality of the covenant of grace in reconciling and being

1024

reconciled; 1025

and they proclaim the power of Christ's reign 1026

for the renewal of the world in justice and in peace. 1027

Brought by the Holy Spirit into Christ's presence, 1028

the church eagerly expects and prays for the day 1029

when Christ shall come in glory and God be all in all 1030

(Directory for Worship, W-2.4002, 2.4004, 2.4007). 1031

1032

Having gathered around the Word, and around the Water, we are prepared to gather 1033
around the Table. At the table we give thanks, recalling all that God has done for us, we

1034

partake of the divine presence, receiving the food of Christ's very self, and we celebrate

1035

our oneness with friends and family, neighbors and strangers, through the power of the

1036

Spirit. At the table we meet the triune God who welcomes us as Table, Food, and Server

1037

(Catherine of Siena, *Prayer* 12); here we see that God for us is at once Grace, Love, and

1038

Communion. 1039

. 1040

Eucharist is the great thanksgiving. 1041

1042

Eternal God, holy and mighty, 1043

it is truly right and our greatest joy 1044

to give you thanks and praise, 1045

and to worship you in every place where your glory abides. 1046

1047

You revealed your glory 1048

as the glory also of your Son and of the Holy Spirit, 1049

three Persons, equal in majesty, undivided in splendor, 1050

yet one Lord, one God, 1051

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24

to be worshiped and adored in your eternal glory. 1052

We praise you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, 1053

great Trinity of power and love, 1054

our God, forever and ever (*Book of Common Worship*, pp.126, 136). 1055

1056

The Lord's Supper is also a grateful remembering of the drama of salvation. We recall

1057

Christ's words at the Last Supper, and Jesus' saving death is brought into the present

1058

moment for us as we share the loaf and the cup. 1059

1060

Jesus, the true Savior of the world, who died for us and is seated in glory 1061

at the right hand of the Father, dwell in your hearts through His Holy 1062

Spirit, that you be wholly alive in Him, through living faith and perfect 1063

love (John Calvin, *Form of Church Prayers* 223). 1064

1065

Eucharistic Prayers – The Great Thanksgiving – give voice to the powerful grace of the

1066

triune God. The very structure of Eucharistic prayers is trinitarian, giving thanks for the

1067

work of the one God. Our *Presbyterian Hymnal* (p.13) describes the movement of this

1068

prayer. The opening of the prayer “gives thanks appropriate to the occasion, 1069

remembering God's mighty acts of salvation.” This leads to the Sanctus (*Holy, Holy,*

1070

Holy), in which the congregation joins in the praise of the Holy One. Thanksgiving 1071

continues, “recalling Christ's work of redemption and gift of the Sacrament,” concluding

1072

with an acclamation that remembers Christ's saving death and resurrection, once and for

1073

all. The third section of the prayer calls upon the power of the Spirit: “The action of the

1074

Holy Spirit is sought, and petitions are offered that we may know the unity we have in
1075

Christ and be empowered for service. The prayer concludes with praise to the triune 1076
God.” 1077

1078

Partaking in this meal changes us, for it is a partaking in the life of the triune God. “The
1079

cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a communion in the blood of Christ? The bread
1080

that we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread,
1081

we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:16, 17).
1082

1083

God the Creator, Thou hast made the bread. 1084

Christ the Redeemer, Thou hast changed it. 1085

Holy Spirit, the Binder, Thou does convey it: 1086

bread for our touching, food for our souls: 1087

Even as our lives are bound together in Thee.... 1088

God the Creator, Thou hast changed us. 1089

Christ, the Redeemer, Thou hast changed us. 1090

Holy Spirit, the Binder, Thou does keep us changed: 1091

Even as now we are bound together in Thee 1092

(George MacLeod, in *A Book of Reformed Prayers*, p. 124). 1093

1094

Holy Communion is a celebration here and now, a meal that nourishes our service in the
1095

world and that whets our appetite for the heavenly banquet. Participation in Holy 1096
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25

Communion creates in us a longing for wholeness, for communion with all creation, for
1097

the promise of God’s Shalom. 1098

1099

1100

SENDING 1101

1102

May the God of hope go with you every day, 1103

Filling all our lives with love and joy and peace. 1104

May the God of justice speed us on our way, 1105

Bringing light and hope to every land and race (PH #432). 1106

1107

Charge and Blessing, Dismissal 1108

1109

Nourished by this hope, the church rises from the Table 1110

and is sent by the power of the Holy Spirit to participate in God’s mission to the

world, 1111

to proclaim the gospel, to exercise compassion, to work for justice and peace
1112

until Christ's Kingdom shall come at last. 1113

God calls the church in worship to join the mission 1114

of Jesus Christ in service to the world. 1115

As it participates in that mission the church is called to worship God in Jesus
Christ, 1116

who reigns over the world 1117

(Directory for Worship, W-2.4008, 7.1002). 1118

1119

In Christian worship, the sending is the beginning – the way we live out what we practice
1120

in worship (Rom 12:1). We have been forgiven, we have taken the Word to heart, we
1121

have been renewed and refreshed, we have offered what we have and are to the one God
1122

who is Giver, Gift, and Giving. The overflowing love of the triune God fills us with 1123
spiritual power, compassionate mercy, and creative imagination, preparing us to live in
1124

this overflowing love. 1125

1126

Arise, O Spirit of Life, 1127

that through Thee we may begin to live; 1128

descend upon us and transform us 1129

into such human beings as the heart of God longs to see, 1130

renewed into the image of Christ, 1131

and going on from glory to glory. 1132

O God, Thou Supreme Good, make Thyself known to us; 1133

through Jesus Christ our Lord. 1134

Amen (Gerhard Tersteegen, in *A Book of Reformed Prayers*, p. 60). 1135

1136

Just as we gather around the Word and the Font and the Table, so we are sent out to 1137

proclaim the good news, to welcome the stranger, and to feed the hungry. The 1138

worshipping community is sent forth with a charge. 1139

1140

As you have been fed at this table--go to feed the hungry. 1141

As you have been set free--go to set free the imprisoned. 1142

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26

As you have received—give. 1143

As you have heard—proclaim. 1144

And the blessing which you have received 1145

from Creator, Son and Spirit go with you 1146

(*Iona Abbey Worship Book*, p. 189). 1147

1148

As we go from worship into the world, words of blessing and benediction are spoken,

1149
1150
The blessing of God and the Lord be yours, 1151
The blessing of the perfect Spirit be yours, 1152
The blessing of the Three be pouring for you 1153
Mildly and generously, 1154
Mildly and generously (*Celtic Vision*, p. 248). 1155
1156
The grace of Christ attend you, 1157
the love of God surround you, 1158
the Holy Spirit keep you, 1159
that you may live in faith, 1160
abound in hope, 1161
and grow in love, 1162
both now and forevermore. 1163
Amen (*Book of Common Worship*, p. 851). 1164
1165

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, 1166
the love of God, 1167
and the communion of the Holy Spirit 1168
be with you all. 1169

Amen! 1170

1171

1172

III. EMBODYING GOD'S OVERFLOWING LOVE 1173

1174

The life of faith is our embodiment of God's overflowing love in the world. Because
1175

God is love, the love of God and neighbor becomes the pattern for our life as creatures
1176

made in the divine image. "If we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is
1177

perfected in us" (1 Jn 4:7-12). The Law of Moses insists on the inextricable connection
1178

between God's love toward us and our love of others. This whole-hearted love is made
1179

clear in the *Shema*: 1180

1181

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. 1182

You shall love the LORD your God 1183

with all your heart, 1184

and with all your soul, 1185

and with all your might. 1186

Keep these words that I am commanding you today 1187

in your heart (Deut 6:4-6). 1188

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27

1189

At the center of both law and gospel is the commandment to embody God's 1190
overflowing love in all our relationships. Jesus commanded his disciples to love 1191
one another, "By this will everyone know that you are my disciples if you have 1192
love for one another." He even taught his followers to love their enemies (Matt 1193
5:44). When asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus recalled the *Shema*. 1194
1195

"You shall love the Lord your God 1196

with all your heart, 1197

and with all your soul, 1198

and with all your mind." 1199

This is the greatest and first commandment. 1200

And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 1201

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matt 1202
22:36-40). 1203

1204

The abundant overflowing love of Giver, Gift, and Giving draws us out of ourselves and
1205

into life and love-affirming acts of giving and receiving. As we delight in the glory, 1206
majesty, and beauty of holiness, we are drawn into the communion of restored 1207
relationship. In gratitude for the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the
1208

communion of the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to live in love, and emboldened to bear
1209

witness and to serve. The pattern of our worship shapes the pattern of our lives together.
1210

The Spirit's presence in the life of the church creates a community which bears witness to
1211

God's welcoming, reconciling, sanctifying, just, sharing, celebrating and blessed love.
1212

1213

Welcoming Love 1214

Reconciling Love 1215

Sanctifying Love 1216

Loving Justly 1217

Sharing Love 1218

Celebrating Love 1219

Love's Blessing 1220

The following reflections on the embodiment of God's triune love seek to open the 1221
scriptures in the way that sermons do. Through a variety of human voices, the Spirit 1222
challenges us to embody God's overflowing love. 1223

1224

Welcoming Love 1225

1226

*Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, 1227
for the glory of God (Rom 15:7). 1228*

1229

When God introduced Eve to Adam, Adam welcomed her with open arms. “You are,

1230

indeed, bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!” he said (Gen 2:23). Recognizing his

1231

fundamental connection to her, his shared humanity with her, he could not help but 1232

celebrate her presence, imagining the possibilities for what life would look like together.

1233

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28

1234

We continue to grieve over what happens next. For somehow, in the course of a few 1235

verses, Adam moves from exulting in his fellowship with Eve to blaming her for his own

1236

violation of God’s law. From “bone of bone and flesh of flesh” to “she made me do it!

1237

She gave me the fruit! It’s *her fault*” (see Gen 3:12). The once-beloved Eve, she who

1238

shares in the very substance of Adam, is no longer welcome. Fellowship is broken. 1239

Lines are now drawn. 1240

1241

What would the world be like if we could get back to the welcoming words of Adam, the

1242

fundamental recognition that we share in the same stuff of creaturely existence? What

1243

would it mean for us to know that our lives in some sense indwell those of one another as

1244

those made in the image of the triune God, that One who is perfectly united even in 1245

differentiation? 1246

1247

Of course our conviction and our hope is that the church is a place where we seek to 1248

welcome one another with the enthusiasm of Adam meeting Eve. One church gives 1249

every visitor homemade brownie mix, wrapped up in a cutely-decorated Mason jar. And

1250

That’s not a bad start, even if it’s still a far cry from looking the visitor in the eye and

1251

knowing that it is we, only together, who reflect the image of God. The truth is that 1252

getting beyond a superficial offering of niceties to the genuine connection of deep 1253

welcoming is difficult for us--even impossible for us--because we are divided. We are

1254

divided by our denial of sin, by our blaming others for the predicament we find ourselves

1255

in. We size people up and evaluate them and stereotype them, keeping them at arms’ 1256

length rather than truly receiving them. 1257

1258

So how do we get back to that joy-full cry of Adam? Our forbears in the faith--as far
1259
back as Irenaeus (d. ca. 202)--were fond of putting Adam's words in the mouth of Jesus
1260
Christ himself. The one who entered into the womb of Mary, who loved to share a meal
1261
with friends and with strangers, who cried out in agony on the cross; this one looks us
1262
directly in the eye and says, "you are bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." We are
1263
welcomed as God's beloved because God has entered into fundamental connection with
1264
us in the person of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. 1265
1266
Given that God is simultaneously different from us, how all this works is a mystery. But
1267
it is a mystery which is revealed to us, known by us, and to which we are called to bear
1268
witness. Convinced of the reality of God's welcoming love, the Apostle Paul extended
1269
welcome to Jews and Gentiles, eager for all to know "the plan of the mystery hidden for
1270
ages in God who created all things" (Eph 3:10). He insisted that through Christ, in one
1271
Spirit, all have access to the Father. We are, therefore, "no longer strangers and aliens. . .
1272
but members of the household of God" (Eph 2:18-19). The rift has been healed; we are
1273
free to welcome one another with open arms. 1274
1275
One pastor does an exceptional job of conveying that the welcoming work of the church
1276
is rooted and grounded in the overflowing love of the welcoming, triune God (Eph 3:17).
1277
Every church, of course, wants to be welcoming. But in this church the welcome seems
1278
to be oriented in a place where it cannot be robbed by the fragility of our pettiness, our
1279
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29
blaming, our sin. The service begins with a processional, a loaf of crusty bread and a
1280
beautiful chalice brought down the center aisle, followed by a pitcher of water large 1281
enough to need two hands to carry it. The processional ends; the music stops. The pastor
1282
goes to the table, her face full of the joy that comes when we have the opportunity to
1283

share that great mystery which is the heart of our faith. She breaks the bread, and lifts the
1284

chalice. She pours the pitcher of water into the font until it splashes over the sides. 1285

Lifting her hands, she looks out at those gathered and greets them with the words, 1286
“Welcome home.” 1287

1288

1289

Reconciling Love 1290

1291

While he was still far off, his father saw him 1292

and was filled with compassion... (Lk 15:20). 1293

1294

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself... 1295

and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Cor 5:18). 1296

1297

In Jesus’ parable of the prodigal, a restless son cuts his ties with his family, leaves home,
1298

and squanders his portion of the family treasure. When he loses everything, he decides to
1299

return home to ask for his father’s forgiveness. But before the prodigal has a chance to
1300

make his plea, his father runs out to embrace him, orders that he be dressed in royal garb,
1301

and arranges a feast to celebrate his return. This familiar parable of Jesus describes the
1302

unexpected, overflowing, extravagant love of God who works for our reconciliation long
1303

in advance of our journey home. 1304

1305

There is, however, a second part of the story that is sometimes overlooked. The elder
1306

brother of the prodigal is angry and resentful. He resists being reconciled to his 1307

undeserving brother. He refuses to rejoice in the father’s gracious act of reconciliation.
1308

1309

As the second part of the parable suggests, the reconciling love of God arouses 1310

resistance. It challenges our sense of moral superiority. It upsets attitudes and practices
1311

like racial prejudices and class divisions that keep us at war with God and each other.
1312

1312

Like the elder brother we often prefer to justify our separation from others, to nurse our
1313

1313

wounds, and to harbor our resentments. We resist the truth that right relationship with
1314

1314

God is inseparable from reconciliation with our brothers and sisters. 1315

1316

In addition to arousing resistance, the reconciling love of God is *costly*. Just as the father
1317
of Jesus' parable spares no expense in bringing about reconciliation with his lost son, so
1318
for the reconciliation of the world God in Jesus Christ became obedient unto death. By
1319
his own blood Christ has created one new humanity, breaking down all dividing walls,
1320
and giving us all "access in one Spirit to the Father" (Eph 2:18). If we are to participate
1321
in the reconciling love of God, there will be a cost. We will have to empty ourselves of
1322
the self-righteousness, the abuse of power, and the deadly desire to control others that
1323
build walls between us and God and between us and other people. We will have to allow
1324
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30
ourselves to be united with our servant Lord by the transforming power of the Holy 1325
Spirit. 1326
1327
The parable also teaches that the reconciling love of God is *inclusive*. It embraces the
1328
despised as well as the respected. It includes every aspect of human life: the personal and
1329
the communal, the economic and the political, our relationships with friends and our
1330
relationships with enemies. 1331
1332
According to the parable of the prodigal and indeed according to the entire biblical 1333
witness, the reconciling love of God is both a surprising *gift* and a high *calling*. We are
1334
all called to the ministry of reconciliation by the reconciling love of God. To be 1335
reconciled to the triune God is to be forgiven, made new, given reason to rejoice, and sent
1336
into the world as ambassadors of the love of God in Christ by the power of the Holy 1337
Spirit. 1338
1339
In a world addicted to violence, the biblical message of the reconciling love of God calls
1340
us to be agents of reconciliation in our family, in our church, in our community, and in
1341
international relationships. We are called to be peacemakers and to work at settling 1342
disputes without recourse to violence. "The church, in its own life, is called to practice
1343
the forgiveness of enemies, and to commend to the nations as practical politics the search
1344

for cooperation and peace” (BC 9.45). 1345

1346

The reconciling love of the triune God calls and enables us to embrace those we often

1347

exclude because we consider them “other,” “different,” “unworthy,” “the enemy.” When

1348

under the prompting of the Holy Spirit we dare to take part in the ministry of 1349

reconciliation in response to God’s reconciling love in Jesus Christ for us and for the

1350

world, we bear witness to and participate in the very being and activity of the triune God.

1351

1352

1353

Sanctifying Love 1354

1355

... that we may present everyone complete in Christ. 1356

For this I toil and struggle with all the energy 1357

that he powerfully inspires within me (Col 1:28-29). 1358

1359

The gospels are full of healing stories, accounts of Jesus healing the sick, the lame, the

1360

blind, the bent, the broken. Luke tells the story of ten lepers who cry to Jesus for mercy;

1361

all ten are healed and cleansed (Lk 17), but only one returns thanks. In the gospels, 1362

bodily healing is most often accompanied by some kind of spiritual healing, by 1363

forgiveness, newfound faith, the praise of God, the telling of good news. “Your faith has

1364

made you well,” Jesus says to one leper, the only one of ten who turned around and said

1365

“thank you” to Jesus for making him clean and whole. This man was not only unclean, a

1366

leper, an outcast, but a foreigner, a Samaritan. He obeyed Jesus and was cleansed and he

1367

came back shouting praise to God. His healing was complete; he was cleansed from the

1368

inside out. Spiritual wholeness and physical well-being are connected. Salvation, 1369

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31

sanctity, health and healing are integral to Jesus’ ministry. Holiness and wholeness, 1370

wellness and well-being go together. 1371

1372

We all have holiness codes. Some people are clean; others are not. To some, holiness

1373

has to do with legalism, with outward adherence to rules and regulations. But Jesus said,

1374

“it’s not what goes into your mouth that makes you unclean, but what comes out” (Matt

1375

15:11, para.). What we say and what we do come from the inside out. Here the words of
1376

Jesus and the spirit of the Law are in concert. God looks on the heart. Our bodies are
1377

temples of the Holy Spirit. By faith we are made whole slowly but surely; by loving God
1378

wholeheartedly—body, mind, soul, and strength--we learn to love as God loves, fully and
1379

freely. 1380

Sanctity moves from the inside out. Sanctification is a lifelong process of growth in
1381 grace. We are healed, restored, freed, transformed into God's likeness by degrees. 1382

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is 1383

freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord 1384

as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image 1385

from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the 1386

Spirit (2 Cor 3.17-18). 1387

1388

God's holy love rubs off on us and that holiness, our wholeness, rubs off on 1389

others—on neighbors and strangers, on the weak and the strong--through whole- 1390

hearted love, love that seeks the welfare and well-being of friend and foe, of 1391

creatures and of creation itself. It is a holy mystery: we are bearers of divine love 1392

and holiness. Our relationship with the holy Trinity enables us to see the world 1393

with new insight; suddenly the ordinary becomes sacred; people, time, places are 1394

hallowed. 1395

1396

Augustine said, "Love God and do as you please." He knew that if God's love 1397

dwells in us we will become more loving; if God's holiness cleanses us, we will 1398

become more and more whole; if God's grace fills us grace will grow in us. We 1399

will be changed by the gracious love of the triune God making our lives as 1400

creatures in the world more holy. We begin to see ourselves and others as saints. 1401

Holiness happens from the inside out. 1402

1403

1404

1405

Loving Justly 1406

1407

And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love 1408

kindness and to walk humbly with your God (Mic 6:8). 1409

1410

And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now 1411

own do not sin again" (John 8:11b). 1412

1413

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32

To do justice...that's a tough call. *A Brief Statement of Faith* affirms the justice

mandate: 1414

“In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage . . . to work with others for
1415

justice, freedom, and peace” (BC 66, 71). Yet age-old conditions are witness to the 1416
failure to live and love justly. Justice butts up against power, privilege, and prejudice.
1417

The ancient cries for justice are manifold. Habakkuk laments the reality that “...justice
1418

never prevails” (Hab 1:4b). Malevolence compels Esther to speak. Amos voices God’s
1419

indignation: “I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Take away from me the noise
1420

of your songs. But let justice roll down like water. . .” (Am 5:21, 23-24). 1421
1422

Put simply, “God don’t like ugly!” This African American colloquialism reflects divine
1423

displeasure with the ways of the world: “[The Lord] expected justice, but saw bloodshed;
1424

righteousness, but heard a cry!” (Isa 5: 7b). Today every part of the world is teeming
1425

with systems and attitudes that oppress, destroy and serve as insidious weapons of mass
1426

destruction. Hymnist Brian Wren strikes a chord for loving action: 1427
1428

With faith newborn and passionate for justice, 1429

together now, we’ll travel out from home, 1430

to sacrifice the peace of calm uprightness, 1431

and struggle for the city of Shalom 1432

(Brian Wren, *Piece Together Praise*). 1433

1434

“Sacrifice” and “struggle”--words that signal hard work, discomfort, and often reflect a
1435

voice in the wilderness, radical and standing alone. Jesus rejects laws that cause 1436
suffering, laws with loopholes, laws that steal personhood, laws that kill the spirit. 1437
When tested, he offers a radical standard of justice. The woman accused of adultery is
1438

such a test. The law is clear; adulterers are stoned. The accusers are on firm legal 1439
ground. But, while legally correct, are they *morally* correct? Does their law reflect 1440
God’s justice? 1441

1442

No! We are called to a higher standard. 1443

1444

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves 1445

another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit 1446

adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet;” 1447

and any other divine commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love 1448

your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, 1449
love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom 13:8-10). 1450
1451
Love overflowing is the essence of the Three in One; right relationship, complete and
1452
perfect within the Trinity draws us to ponder all our relationships and our participation in
1453
creating a just society. Through the lens of love, the woman’s accusers fail the test, “Is
1454
this God’s justice?” 1455
1456
In the movie, *A Few Good Men*, two marines obey orders to punish Willie, a comrade,
1457
but perceived as a weakling, a snitch, and an embarrassment to the squad. Their actions
1458
result in Willie’s accidental death and they are dishonorably discharged. Crushed by the
1459
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33
verdict, one marine cries, “We followed an order. What did we do wrong? We didn’t do
1460
anything wrong!” The other responds, “Yeah, we did. We were supposed to fight for 1461
those who couldn’t fight for themselves. We were supposed to fight for Willie.” 1462
1463
God’s justice is full of compassion and reflects a fierce bias toward the weak. God calls
1464
us to fight for the Willies of the world—women, children and men, vulnerable and 1465
invisible. They rummage through trashcans; they stand in line for jobs and food; they are
1466
below the poverty line; they are across the border; they are in prison; they are in debt.
1467
They are our neighbors, but through indifference we do not to see them. Indifference
1468
may become cruelty when justice is meted out to strangers or enemies. Is cruelty ever
1469
permissible as a means to an end? Is this God’s justice? 1470
1471
Loving justly affirms Jesus’ blessing and sending to go and sin no more. Loving justly is
1472
more than mere lip service to an ideal. It means that love, even in radical forms, is the
1473
only order that we obey. It requires sacrifice and struggle for Shalom. 1474
1475
This is the justice of the triune God--the prospect of that peaceful kingdom where the
1476
wolf and lamb feed together, the cow and the bear graze, and where none will hurt or
1477

destroy on God's holy mountain (Isa 65:25). God gives us the mandate; Jesus gives us
1478
the example; the Spirit gives us courage. . .to do justice—a tough, but high calling. 1479
1480
1481

Sharing Love 1482

1483
And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, 1484
so that by always having enough of everything, 1485
you may share abundantly in every good work (2 Cor 9:8). 1486

1487
What might a community that faithfully reflects God's intentions for human relationships
1488
look like? The apostle Paul suggests that it would look like a human body, constituted by
1489
its various parts and indistinguishable from them (I Cor 12, Rom 12, Eph. 4). Christ is
1490
the head of this body, in which Christians are literally members of one another (Rom
1491
12:5). This unprecedented interconnectedness came to be called *koinonia* in the New
1492
Testament, and took on very tangible characteristics (Acts 2:42-47). The early 1493
Christians shared everything with one another: love, time, property, possessions, energy,
1494
wisdom, compassion, assistance. In this reciprocal sharing, the body and its members
1495
received power to display the triune God's overflowing love to the world, in fulfillment
1496
of the risen Christ's commission to make disciples (Matt 28:18-20). "And day by day
1497
the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). 1498
1499

Koinonia is sharing, participation, partaking, communion. As the early Christians 1500
reflected more deeply on the nature of God's triune life in the light of Jesus' incarnation,
1501
life, suffering, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and return, they came to see that the
1502
unparalleled depths of communion that they experienced every day in their shared life
1503
with one another were actually the overflow of God's own love. This overflowing love
1504

existed eternally in God as the mutual participation, self-giving, vulnerability, 1505

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34

interdependence, and responsibility shared among the divine persons. As the divine 1506
koinonia, it was the source of all human *koinonia*. By the Holy Spirit, this mutually self-

1507

giving divine life graciously overflowed in a sharing of God's limitless generosity and

1508

abundance with us in Jesus Christ. 1509

1510

In our life together in the church, the body of Christ, the implications are staggering.

1511

Partaking of the very life of God, we participate unreservedly in one another's lives. 1512

Freely sharing God's abundant blessings with others, we reflect God's infinite self-giving

1513

in attitudes and acts of human generosity. 1514

1515

We *partake* regularly together of God's extravagant grace in worship, sharing in the

1516

very body and blood of Christ, and miraculously being interconnected with one 1517

another as we receive the bread and the cup (1 Cor 10:16-17). 1518

1519

We *give* generously and sacrificially of the abundant resources God places at our 1520

disposal, recognizing that we and they belong to God, and that we hold all of God's 1521

benefits in trust as stewards, to be administered for the benefit of others. 1522

1523

We *open ourselves transparently* to one another in our faults, weakness, and 1524

suffering, accepting the vulnerability this entails in the light the cross sheds on God's

1525

eternal vulnerability to the world's pain. We do this in the conviction that God's 1526

grace is sufficient, and God's strength is made perfect in weakness and suffering (2 1527

Cor 4:6-7, 12:9). 1528

1529

We *practice interdependence* in our relationships, rejecting the pretense of self- 1530

sufficiency. We are freed to "need" one another without co-dependence, and to give 1531

and receive from others, recognizing that our destinies are inseparably connected and

1532

we stand or fall together. 1533

1534

We willingly *assume responsibility* for one another, especially the weak, the 1535

marginalized, and the needy, placing our resources as needed at the disposal of others

1536

with whom we are inseparably connected as co-sharers of the divine generosity. 1537

1538

The overflow of God's trinitarian love does not stop with the Christian community. The

1539

pattern of *koinonia* in the early church was one of ever-expanding circles of sharing,

1540

ever-broadening boundaries of participation, giving, vulnerability, interdependence, and

1541

responsibility for one another, all humankind, and ultimately the whole creation. As the

1542

triumph God's extravagant love continues to overflow in the church today, we receive 1543
power to share the abundant love of God in the world, in word and deed. Thus the Lord

1544

adds to our numbers daily, as we grow in grace and embody God's love in tangible deeds

1545

of self-giving before a world desperately in need of the Good News. 1546

1547

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1551

Celebrating Love 1552

1553

The days are coming, declares the LORD, when the one who plows shall overtake

1554

the one who reaps, and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed; 1555

the mountains shall drip sweet wine, 1556

and all the hills shall flow with it (Amos 9:13). 1557

1558

The wine at the wedding had run out. And for some reason, Jesus' mother goes to him to

1559

report this social *faux pas*. Jesus says, "Why are you bothering me, mother? My hour
has 1560

not yet come." But there just happened to be six huge stone water jars lying around—20

1561

to 30 gallons each. Jesus has them filled with water and taken to the master of 1562

ceremonies. Then the celebrating really starts. Jesus has provided the best wine of the

1563

whole night—and an unbelievable amount of it! (Jn 2:1-10). 1564

1565

John tells us that this was the first "sign" that Jesus is truly the Son of God (Jn 2:11).

1566

Turning water used for washing and purification into an overabundance of wine. What a

1567

sign! We are astonished. But perhaps a little voice in us wonders, Couldn't Jesus have

1568

done something more useful? Was this really the most responsible stewardship of his

1569

ministry resources? We live so seldom in a celebrating mode. We parcel out our time and

1570

energy; we calculate and juggle; we try to figure out what other people can do for us and

1571

in turn what they may be trying to get from us. Jesus' extravagant gesture at the Cana

1572

wedding changes this whole landscape. It takes us from calculating to celebrating. Jesus' 1573

sign is proof that the messianic age is dawning. The reign of God is near! And when this 1574

promised reign comes in fullness, it brings good things with it. It brings an abundance 1575

like you've never seen. It brings joy. 1576

1577

We celebrate the extravagance of God's love for us already now. Even before we know 1578

our own name, our Maker claims us. Even before we knock, our Gracious Host opens the 1579

door for us. Even before we ask for food, our Good Shepherd spreads a table before us. 1580

The creative, redemptive, sustaining love of God takes the shape of extravagant 1581
hospitality towards all creation. We are intended to live joyfully and generously, assured 1582

of God's gracious abundance. 1583

1584

God's extravagance towards us frees us to be generous, even extravagant, in our dealings 1585

with others. We can respect and celebrate the creation as God's good gift, rather than 1586

depleting it for our own selfish purposes. We can enjoy our relationships with other 1587
people because we're not always angling for what we can gain from them. God's 1588
generosity towards us frees us to think about our time and money differently. We don't 1589

have to spend our days anxiously building bigger barns to protect all our treasure. We can 1590

throw off the burden of ceaseless productivity, so we have time to keep Sabbath, time to 1591

devote to praising God and renewing our bodies and souls. "Come to me, all you that are 1592

weary and are carrying heavy burdens," Jesus says, "and I will give you rest." (Matt 1593
11:28) 1594

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1595

The joy of the triune God is poured out on creation, so that all creation will rejoice. 1596
Salvation is feasting in the kingdom of God, where people will come from north, south, 1597

east, and west to sit at table together. Their celebration will satisfy the yearnings of body 1598

and spirit. Their fellowship will shatter boundaries of language and culture and past 1599
enmity. In Jesus' fellowship meals, in the homes of Pharisees or of Gentiles, surrounded 1600

by thousands or alone with his disciples, hints of this joyful communion begin to heal the
1601

pain and brokenness of human life. His followers glimpse the glorious end that awaits
1602

them: celebrating together in God's new realm. The picture of Jesus we get at this 1603
extraordinary wedding at Cana tells us that God is not interested just in our failings and
1604

sorrows, but in our joys as well. Our lives, both now and forever, are to reflect the 1605
fullness of God's perfect joy. "Everything is ready! Come to the banquet!" (Matt 22:4)
1606

1607

1608

Love's Blessing 1609

1610

Genesis 12:1-3; 22:1-19 1611

Luke 1:26-38; 2:25-35 1612

1613

*"Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your
1614*

*father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation,
and I* 1615

will bless you" 1616

1617

*"The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with
God. And* 1618

*now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him
Jesus. . . . ' 1619*

*Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to
her,* 1620

*'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will
overshadow* 1621

you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.'"

1622

1623

The blessing of God is a vocation. 1624

It calls us, as it called Abram, 1625

to leave all that is familiar for what is yet to be revealed. 1626

It calls us, as it called Mary, 1627

to be a people who, by the favor of God, 1628

bear the divine Word, 1629

as it is conceived in us by the Holy Spirit. 1630

1631

"I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." 1632

1633

*"Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according
to your* 1634

word.” 1635

1636

The blessing of God requires of us a choice: 1637

to be blessing, as Abram, 1638

not for ourselves but for others; 1639

to ‘let it be’ with us, as with Mary, 1640

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37

according to God’s word. 1641

1642

“I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all 1643

the families of the earth shall be blessed.” 1644

1645

“Then Simeon blessed them and said to. . . Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling 1646

and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner 1647

thoughts of many will be revealed.” 1648

1649

Being blessed is no private matter. 1650

It binds us to each other in ways none of us seeks, 1651

for beholding God’s blessing in another 1652

compels from us a choice. 1653

Like the neighbors of Abram 1654

we will respond with blessing or curse. 1655

Indifference is not an option. 1656

Like the neighbors of Mary’s son, 1657

in our response we disclose our hearts. 1658

God will be the judge. 1659

The blessed one, like Abram, must only remain true. 1660

1661

“[God] said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of 1662

Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show 1663

you.” 1664

1665

“And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” 1666

1667

Blessing comes with a price. 1668

Abram, now Abraham, must be willing to sacrifice the blessing 1669

as burnt offering to his God. 1670

The handmaid of the Lord, blessed among women 1671

will herself give birth to blessing, 1672

and it will tear apart her heart. 1673

1674

Being blessed is having our identity, 1675
who we are in relation to God and each other, 1676
formed by Love's gifts, Love's promises, Love's claims. 1677
1678

Being blessed is being made blessing, 1679
an embodiment of the image in which we are made: 1680
giver, gift, giving; 1681
lover, beloved, love. 1682

1683

1684

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1685

1686

Conclusion: Our Hope 1687

1688

Our theological reflection begins and ends with the love of God made known to us in
1689

Jesus Christ: 1690

1691

For God so loved the world.... (Jn 3:16). 1692

1693

Only divine love can give meaning to our preaching and our practice: 1694

1695

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, 1696

but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.... (1 Cor 13:1). 1697

1698

In the end, it is that overflowing love that keeps us and holds us: 1699

1700

...neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come,

1701

nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to 1702

separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:39). 1703

1704

And so our prayers embody our hope that all may rejoice in the boundless love of the

1705

triune God: 1706

1707

[We] pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, 1708

God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being 1709

with power through the Spirit, 1710

and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, 1711

as you are being rooted and grounded in love. 1712

[We] pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, 1713

what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 1714

and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, 1715

so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph 3:16-19). 1716

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